

The new Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland

Pete Murphy and **Kirsten Greenhalgh** welcome a strategic and joined-up approach to the service north of the border

The new Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland¹ recently published for public consultation by the Scottish government, is further evidence of the diverging path that the service is taking north and south of the border since Scottish devolution.

As readers will be aware, a single service has been created north of the border, which has won widespread plaudits for the success of its transformation from eight services into one, capped by a recent ringing endorsement from Audit Scotland².

The Scottish governments' current proposals for a new national framework is a clear improvement on its predecessor and more fit-for-the future of the service. In truth the previous framework was part transformation plan and part change strategy for the establishment of the single services as well as an embryonic national framework.

While the current draft is a welcome improvement on its predecessor, the articulation of nine strategic priorities for the service, drawn from the high level 'National Outcomes' for Scotland³, also makes the document a much better basis for producing the next strategic plan for the service and the subsequent operational and local plans that are required by law in Scotland.

Although there are a number of detailed areas we would wish to see improved, the current proposals generally adopt an explicitly strategic approach and accompanies this with a convincing and coherent narrative. The strategic priorities are clearly the product of 'joined-up' policy-making, designed to facilitate collaborative and integrated public service delivery.

The document therefore embraces the post-devolution holistic system-wide thinking of the post Christie⁴ era in Scotland. It balances the need to embed national priorities with local flexibility and discretion. It also articulates a robust and realistic collaborative approach to service delivery. It will encourage and facilitate collaborative working across emergency services and across the wider public sector. It is in stark contrast to the Home Office's more assertive and partial approach in England⁵.

Collaboration and cohesion, not assertion and exhortation, is the key to the Scottish government's strategy for public sector reform. As a result, the current proposals demonstrate both a strategic and an integrated approach to the planning, governance, improvement and future delivery of fire and rescue services north of the border.



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Not surprisingly, there are a few areas where we believe it could be improved. It does not, for instance, mention the service's inter-relationship with the insurance industry, nor its nontangible assets such as trust and reputation. It does not clarify any joint objectives with the NHS or other services, although it does provide good examples of current joint working.

Some of our concerns revolve around judgements about what is appropriate for a national framework, and what you might reasonably expect to appear in the strategic and/or operational plans developed from a national framework.

However, in an annex to the main document, the government has put forward a number of suggested measures and potential targets for the service. This is where the document hits a very discordant note, which will undoubtedly have sent alarm bells ringing.

In our view, detailed targets and measures are usually best included in the strategic and operational plans required of the service rather than a high-level strategic framework.

However, there is also some unexploded munitions and devil in this detail.

The current suggestions for measures and targets are very traditional, unsophisticated and exclusively quantitative targets – an issue Audit Scotland pointed out about the previous frameworks' targets. They are likely to be interpreted as a reflection of discredited top down micro management from an earlier era that the service had hoped had disappeared.

They do not reflect the latest thinking or good practice in performance, measurement, management and monitoring.

On their own, they are clearly inadequate, as they do not reflect the width and scale of the organisation's services nor the ambitions and objectives of the service and its strategic stakeholders.

There is no real justification or explanation of how the targets have been determined, or whether they are realistic, feasible or achievable. In performance management terms, they look like an example of 'counting what can be counted' not 'counting what counts'. In their current form, they are almost certain to be counter-productive and lead to a series of unintended consequences and perverse outcomes. They should be withdrawn and replaced.

A comprehensive and more sophisticated basket of indicators has to be developed. These

should be drawn from the strategic priorities and capable of being nested into the strategic and operational plans already called for by the government, and being worked on by the service.

Over the last two years academics, including ourselves, have been comparing and contrasting the development of policy and practice in Scotland with changing policy and practice in England.

The recent Police and Fire Reform programme in Scotland has run in parallel with proposals for greater collaboration between the emergency service and new governance arrangements under police and crime commissioners in England. Both will no doubt provide lessons for the future, as both are intended to provide a more economic, efficient and effective service and ultimately better outcomes for our communities.

One thing we particularly support about the Scottish approach is its re-commitment to an evidenced-led approach. In England there has been a clear retreat from an explicit evidenced approach exemplified by the sparsity of evidence adduced for the PCC takeover⁶.

In England, where evidence is produced, it is more likely to reflect the government's move away from 'evidenced based policy making' towards 'policy based evidence making'.

Fire and rescue services, for various historical and legal reasons, have always been characterised

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as an evidenced-led service. We welcome the re-commitment to this approach in Scotland. It provides reassurance to the services key stakeholders and, more importantly to the public.

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References

1. The Scottish Government (2016) *Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2016 Consultation*.
2. Audit Scotland (2015) *The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service*
3. The Scottish Government (2016) *The National Performance Framework*
4. The Scottish Government (2010) *Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (The Christie Commission)*
5. Home Office (2016) *Enabling closer working between the emergency services: Summary of consultation responses and next steps*
6. Home Office (2015) *Consultation: Enabling closer working between the emergency services*.

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